



Regions Defined and Dissected

BY PAUL R. FLORA

In 2013, the federal government confirmed what every kid from Waynesboro, PA, had understood 50 years earlier — that Franklin County was inextricably tied to the Washington–Baltimore region. Forsaking the Phillies and Pirates, Little Leaguers from south-central Pennsylvania traveled instead to watch Frank Robinson in the Orioles’ outfield. In the fall, local families jeered the Eagles and Steelers, and cheered as Johnny Unitas led the Baltimore Colts to victories. Good-paying jobs beckoned and TV signals emanated from over the Blue Ridge mountains and inside the dual beltways.

Franklin County is one of several new metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) in the Federal Reserve’s Third District and one of many small MSAs that have been drawn into the much larger statistical constellations of Philadelphia, New York, and Washington–Baltimore (Figure 1).¹ How are these delineations drawn? And what do they reveal about economic vitality and policy challenges in the tristate region? This report describes how population levels and commuting patterns define the Third District’s economic regions using U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) standards. Specifically, how did Franklin County, PA, become tied to the Washington–Baltimore region? Why did a largely rural, four-county region on the Delmarva Peninsula become an MSA? Are Trenton’s ties to New York stronger than its ties to Philadelphia?

The Franklin County example highlights how successful the federal criteria are at capturing the economic and cultural relationships among geographic areas. For researchers, the MSA classification provides a valuable common basis on which to group and study economic regions as

distinct labor markets. However, some economic development patterns will always pose a challenge to a necessarily rigid classification system. Indeed, some of the expansion of these statistical areas has resulted from localized commuting patterns that don’t appear to create the economic benefits one would anticipate from a resilient MSA. This report analyzes the census data to distinguish between commuting generated by adjacent counties and commuting generated by competition from larger, more distant labor markets.

COMMUTERSHEDS DEFINE REGIONS

Numerous criteria may be used to define regions. Watersheds and river basins are a pragmatic choice for environmental planning purposes. Marketing areas were once defined primarily by the strength of television and radio signals. Sports affinities can define a region culturally.² Each of these definitions has some relevance for regional economics, and not surprisingly, fan affiliation is closely aligned with the OMB’s larger combined statistical areas (CSAs). However, commuting patterns are a prime way for economists to define and understand regional economies, and the OMB’s more rigorous approach, which focuses on the strength of commuting patterns among adjacent population centers, sometimes called *commutersheds*, is of most interest for regional economists.³

A commutershed is the broad geographic area from which a

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city's labor force is drawn. A regional economy's resilience is greatly improved by having an extensive commutershed that can provide easy access to good jobs for the region's residents and access to skilled workers for the region's firms. Small, isolated regions have less diversity in the types of jobs and skills found there than do large, integrated urban areas. The quality of a region's transportation infrastructure can greatly enhance or impair accessibility within the commutershed, as can natural features such as waterways that require bridges or tunnels. Residents in the Trenton metro area benefit from the proximity and convenient rail access into both New York and Philadelphia; Wilmington residents can easily reach Philadelphia and Baltimore.

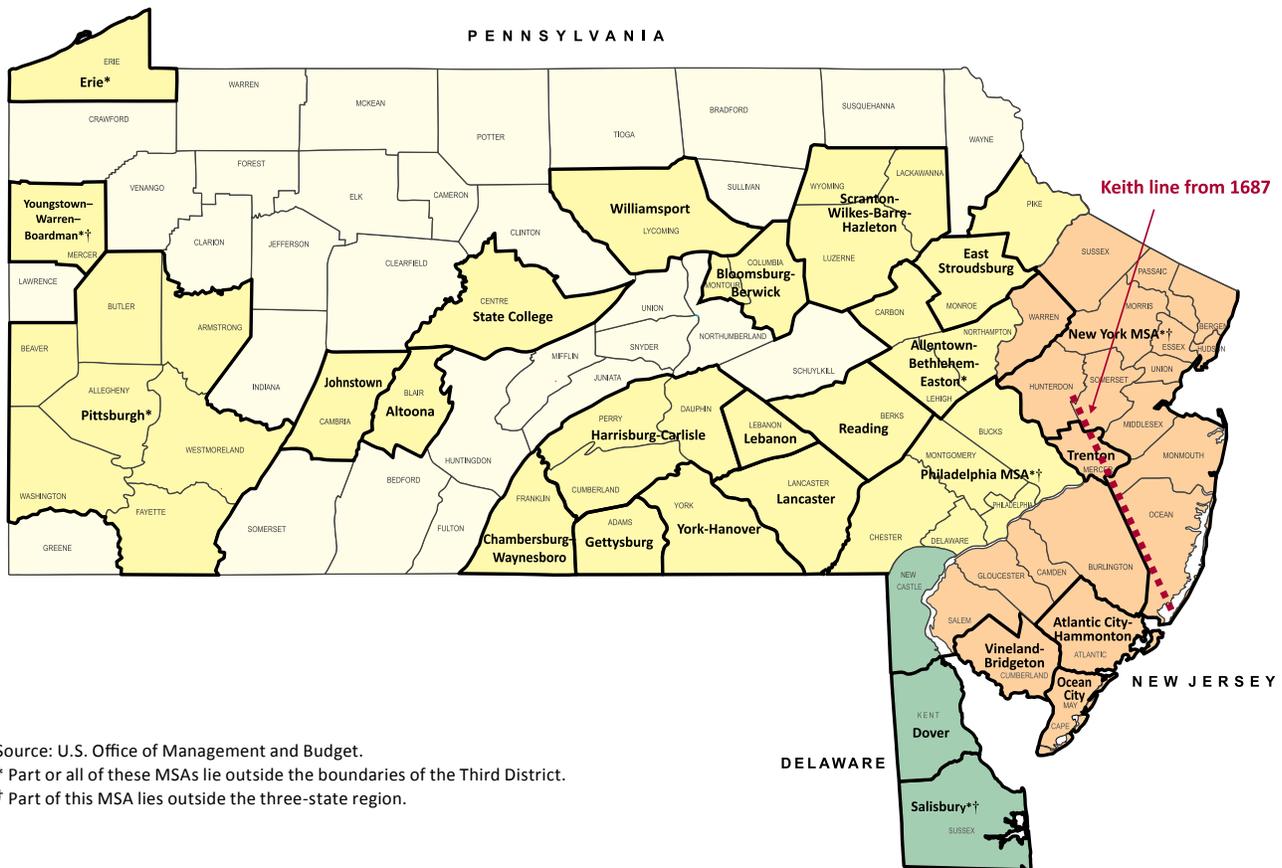
However, much of the expansion of urbanized areas is a product of highways and sprawl, not of enhanced transit infrastructure and compact development. One key to why the Salisbury, DE–MD MSA expanded from two counties to four was the suburban growth of rural areas along the Route 13A corridor and outward from each small town. (See the accompanying discussion, *How Are MSA Boundaries Decided?*) Similar forces help explain the emergence of Cham-

bersburg–Waynesboro and East Stroudsburg as MSAs and of their absorption into larger CSAs.

SPRAWLOPOLIS: NEW YORK AND PHILADELPHIA VIE FOR TERRITORY

In contrast to a *megalopolis* made up of a chain of large metro areas such as the Northeast corridor of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, *sprawlopolis* may be a better term for CSAs. The commuting threshold to combine two statistical areas into a CSA is lower than it is to merge counties and statistical areas — requiring only that the combined percentage of out-commuters from and in-commuters to the smaller statistical area be 15 percent or greater.⁴ CSAs form and expand as long as smaller adjacent metro areas meet the threshold requirement. Their expansion stops when metro areas give way to adjacent rural counties. For example, rural Fulton County, PA, stops the Washington–Baltimore CSA from expanding beyond Franklin County. Alternatively, when the next adjacent metro area has a stronger commuting relationship

FIGURE 1
Tristate MSAs



Source: U.S. Office of Management and Budget.
 * Part or all of these MSAs lie outside the boundaries of the Third District.
 † Part of this MSA lies outside the three-state region.

How Are MSA Boundaries Decided?

The Office of Management and Budget periodically reviews its criteria for delineating metropolitan statistical areas and then realigns areas based on population levels from the decennial census and county-to-county commuting flows from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey.

The OMB’s latest delineation of the Salisbury, MD–DE MSA offers an illuminating glimpse into the rationale. Previously consisting of Somerset and Wicomico counties, MD, it was expanded to include Worcester County, MD, and Sussex County, DE (Figure 2) — creating an MSA with a total of 373,802 people, a larger population than Trenton’s.⁵ And Sussex County contained over half of that total population.

Since the 2000 census, Sussex County had been designated as the Seaford, DE, micropolitan statistical area. That determination had been made based on three characteristics of the census-designated Seaford urban cluster: First, Seaford’s population exceeded the 10,000-person threshold that qualified the county as a core-based statistical area (CBSA). Second, Seaford was the largest urban area in the county, which identified the CBSA with Seaford. Third, the Seaford cluster had fewer than 50,000 people, which meant it would be a micropolitan statistical area and not an MSA.

Over the next 10 years, Sussex County would add over 40,000 people — a growth rate of 26 percent.⁶ Yet, the county remained largely rural; 60 percent of its 197,145 people were scattered among nine urban clusters (ranging from 2,556 people in Milton to 24,129 in Lewes) and one urbanized area (24,588 in the Delaware portion of Salisbury — primarily consisting of the former Seaford cluster). Still, none of those urban areas met the 50,000 population threshold to qualify Sussex County as an MSA; however, the Salisbury urbanized area also contained 73,254 people in a portion of Wicomico County, and therein lies the key.⁷

Because each county’s portion of Salisbury is its largest urban area, Sussex and Wicomico counties are jointly considered the central counties of a single CBSA. Furthermore, Salisbury qualifies as an MSA, since its urbanized area has more than 50,000 residents. Interestingly, had the Lewes cluster not had 459 fewer people than the Sussex portion of the Salisbury urbanized area, then Sussex would have remained a micropolitan statistical area (Table 1).

But with 22 miles of mostly farmland separating their downtowns, how did the former Seaford cluster become part of the Salisbury urbanized area? By 2000, Seaford’s development had sprawled about seven miles southward along the Route 13A corridor as far as Laurel, DE, and Salisbury had sprawled about seven miles northward to Delmar on the state line.⁸ Since then, the remaining distance appears to have been spanned, in part, with a single, large housing development sprouting up midway between Laurel and Delmar.

TABLE 1

A Common Urban Area Tied Sussex to Salisbury

Salisbury MD-DE MSA by County	2010 Population	Largest Qualifying Urban Area	
		Name	Population
Sussex, DE	197,145	Part of Salisbury Urbanized Area	24,588
Somerset, MD	26,470	Princess Anne Urban Cluster	10,396
Wicomico, MD	98,733	Part of Salisbury Urbanized Area	73,254
Worcester, MD	51,454	Ocean Pines Urban Cluster	28,959

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

In addition, census designations can (under yet more arcane criteria) utilize combinations of half-mile “hops” and 2.5-mile “jumps” to connect urban areas interrupted by farmland.

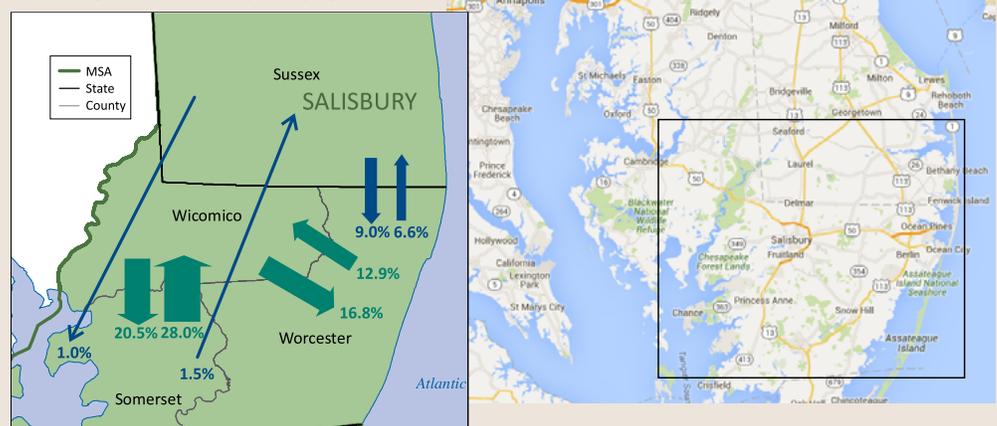
Finally, Somerset County, which had been part of the prior Salisbury MSA, still qualifies as an outlying county to the new MSA, as nearly 30 percent of its 9,180 residents commute to work in Sussex and Wicomico counties, exceeding the 25 percent threshold of residents who commute out or workers who commute in. Worcester County, which had not previously been included in the Salisbury MSA, draws just over 25 percent of its workforce from Sussex (9.0 percent) and Wicomico (16.8 percent). Although it is adjacent to both counties, Worcester would not qualify as part of either Sussex or Wicomico if they were not considered a single cluster of central counties.

Individually, Somerset and Worcester are too small and rural to be considered independent MSAs. However, due to the strength of their commuting ties with the two central counties (out-commuting from Somerset and in-commuting to Worcester), they are both delineated as outlying counties to the Salisbury MSA (Figure 2). Even so, had the census not hopped and skipped across miles of farmland, Sussex and Worcester would still be independent micropolitan statistical areas — taking two-thirds of the present MSA’s population with them.

FIGURE 2

Salisbury MSA Expanded Mainly from a Sliver of Farmland

Commuting flows for Salisbury’s outlying counties.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

with a second large metro area, then expansion of the first is blocked in that direction. An example, as we will see, is the Trenton MSA, sandwiched between the New York and Philadelphia MSAs. The upshot is that CSAs along the Northeast corridor abut one another but do not merge or combine into a megalopolis.

On the basis of population levels and commuting patterns, the Chambersburg–Waynesboro, PA, MSA was combined with the Hagerstown, MD, MSA, and thus with the CSA known as Washington–Baltimore–Arlington, DC–MD–VA–WV–PA. While over 4,000 residents of Franklin County made their way to jobs in the Baltimore–Washington area (more than to adjacent Cumberland County to the north), the strongest tie was driven by the 9,284 Franklin County residents commuting south to adjacent Washington County, MD. The stream of commuters to the Baltimore–Washington area has long existed and recently grown, but the greatest increase in commuting is the local back and forth across the Mason–Dixon line between Franklin County and Washington County.

The Trenton MSA (Mercer County) benefits greatly from its location along the primary rail corridor between New York and Philadelphia. Yet, localized commuting patterns among its adjacent counties continue to play a dominant role. Trenton has been combined with various incarnations of the New York CSA since 1993, when it was plucked from an earlier Philadelphia CSA on the basis of 1990 census data. Before that, Trenton had been partnered with Philadelphia since 1981 on the basis of 1980 census data, and before 1981 and significant suburban expansion, Trenton had been a standalone MSA dating back to 1950, when such designations were first made.

This tug of war between New York and Philadelphia began in the early 17th century with border disputes and multiple survey efforts to distinguish the colonial provinces of East Jersey and West Jersey. In 1687, surveyor George Keith established a 70-mile boundary between the provinces that was disputed before it was finished. The Keith line was eventually invalidated but not before municipal boundaries were established on its basis. To this day, team allegiances and other cultural references — is it called a *hoagie* or a *sub*? — shift along this line (Figure 1).

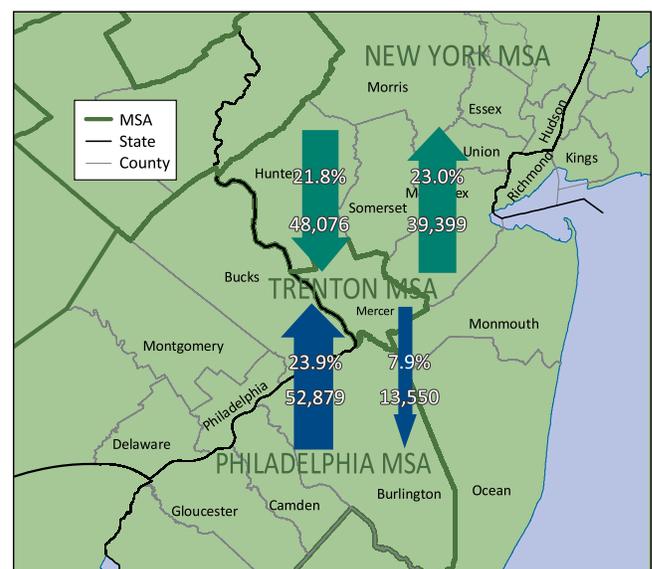
What drives Trenton to New York today? Annual census surveys averaged over 2006–2010 show significant cross-commuting patterns between Trenton and its much larger neighbors. Commuters from the New York and Philadelphia MSAs supply nearly half of Trenton’s workforce: 21.8 percent and 23.9 percent, respectively (Figure 3). Most of

those commuting into Trenton are from suburbs throughout the adjacent counties of Bucks, Burlington, and Middlesex. However, Trenton’s out-commuting ties are far stronger to New York — 23.0 percent of Mercer County residents commute into New York versus only 7.9 percent into Philadelphia. Jobs are more plentiful and wages are higher around New York than around Philadelphia.

Since none of the four possible one-way commutes met the 25 percent threshold, Trenton remained an independent MSA. However, the lower 15 percent threshold for in-commuters and out-commuters combined is easily met by both large MSAs; New York absorbs Trenton into its CSA with a combined 44.8 percent compared with Philadelphia’s 31.8 percent. Interestingly, the share of commuters coming from the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River would have had to increase only 1.1 percent in order for the Philadelphia MSA to have regained Trenton in a merger of statistical areas, as was the case in the 1980s. One could easily imagine that happening if a sizeable, well-placed transit-oriented development were built across the river from downtown Trenton.

A tug of war for Trenton has little value if only for bragging rights. However, transit-oriented developments represent wiser, more sustainable development for urban areas. Creating a transit-oriented development adjacent to

FIGURE 3
Trenton’s Commuting Ties Much Stronger to New York
 Mercer County residents commuting to New York and Philadelphia MSAs; commuters from New York and Philadelphia MSAs into Mercer County.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Trenton would benefit its residents and businesses while providing a larger workforce with easier access to jobs. Strengthening the existing transit connections with faster, more frequent trains between Trenton and Philadelphia would also benefit Trenton's — and Philadelphia's — urban core. Downtown development would increase as households and businesses seek to locate near the transit stops. The growth of downtown housing in turn would attract more retail shops and other commerce. Compact development with workforce housing would also offer the benefit of walkable commutes to local jobs.

RISE OF THE LONG-DISTANCE COMMUTER

East Stroudsburg stands out as an exception to the dominance of

Criteria for Delineating Core-Based Statistical Areas

Each region delineated by the OMB is considered a **core-based statistical area (CBSA)**. These are divided by size into **metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs)** and smaller **micropolitan statistical areas**. Two or more adjacent CBSAs may form a **combined statistical area (CSA)** on the basis of commuting patterns.

To qualify as a CBSA, a county (or group of counties) must have:

- A Census Bureau-delineated *urbanized area* of at least 50,000 residents, or
- A Census Bureau-delineated *urban cluster* of at least 10,000 residents.

Urbanized areas and urban clusters are generally referred to as *urban areas*.

A CBSA is categorized as an MSA if its largest urban area has 50,000 people or more. Otherwise, it is a micropolitan statistical area.

To qualify as a central county of a CBSA, the county must have:

- At least 50 percent of its population residing in urban areas of at least 10,000 residents, or
- Within its boundaries at least 5,000 people residing in a single urban area of at least 10,000 people.

To qualify as an outlying county of a CBSA, a county must have:

- At least 25 percent of its employed residents working in the central county or counties of the CBSA, or
- At least 25 percent of its workforce residing in the central county or counties of the CBSA.

Two adjacent CBSAs will merge to form one CBSA if the central county or counties (as a group) qualify as outlying to the central county or counties (as a group) of the other CBSA, using the criteria above.

Source: U.S. Office of Management and Budget, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/as-sets/fedreg_2010/06282010_metro_standards-Complete.pdf.

TABLE 2

Rise in Treks to New York City Gives East Stroudsburg Longest Average Commute Time

Rank*	Metropolitan Statistical Area	Average one-way commute time		Percent commuting 45 minutes or more each way		Number commuting 45 minutes or more each way	
		1980	2013	1980	2013	1980	2013
1	East Stroudsburg, PA	20.1	37.9	10.4	30.5	2,989	22,102
2	Philadelphia—Camden—Wilmington, PA—NJ—DE—MD**	25.1	28.6	16.6	20.8	357,405	558,425
3	Dover, DE	17.8	27.6	8.0	20.1	3,377	14,672
4	Gettysburg, PA	20.2	27.2	11.4	19.7	3,432	9,350
5	Trenton, NJ	21.7	27.6	9.8	19.0	13,440	31,721
6	York—Hanover, PA	19.6	26.8	7.3	18.9	10,417	39,179
7	Allentown—Bethlehem—Easton, PA—NJ	18.8	27.0	7.1	18.3	19,437	67,438
—	Third District MSAs**	22.1	26.6	12.0	17.6	494,434	1,111,355
8	Reading, PA	17.9	25.6	5.1	16.7	7,026	31,035
—	United States	21.7	25.8	11.6	16.2	10,923,652	22,150,805
9	Lebanon, PA	17.0	23.8	5.1	14.3	2,443	8,656
13	Chambersburg—Waynesboro, PA	18.5	23.6	6.5	12.4	3,182	8,505
14	Salisbury, MD—DE**	18.7	22.6	8.3	12.3	7,263	19,323
22	Williamsport, PA	17.6	20.0	4.8	7.4	2,228	3,719

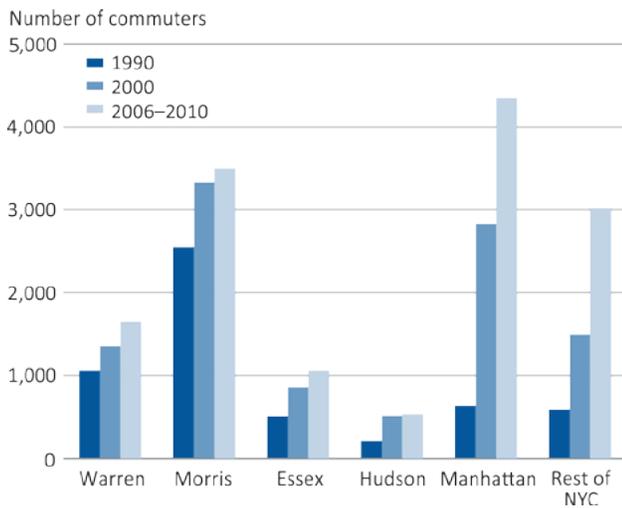
Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

*Rank among 22 Third District MSAs by percent of residents commuting 45 minutes or more each way.

**Includes counties outside the three-state region.

FIGURE 4

A Surge in Super-Commuting from East Stroudsburg
 Monroe County commuters bypass closer counties in favor of New York.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

local commuters over those to distant urban cores. As with Chambersburg–Waynesboro, the East Stroudsburg MSA was promoted from its prior categorization as a stand-alone micropolitan statistical area. It was then combined into the New York CSA. However, in contrast to Chambersburg–Waynesboro, and despite population growth of 22 percent and a pattern of residential sprawl, East Stroudsburg’s commuting linkages have grown much stronger to the distant urban core of New York even as they have also grown among adjacent counties.

Long-distance commuting from Monroe County in the Poconos along the Interstate 80 corridor to Manhattan and the other four boroughs of New York rose dramatically in recent decades (Figure 4). Long-distance commuting from East Stroudsburg tripled from 1980 to 2013 — from 10.4 percent to 30.5 percent.⁹ The increase was much smaller for the nation, from 11.6 percent to 16.2 percent. In 2013, Philadelphia and Dover commuters were distant seconds, with 20.8 percent and 20.1 percent, respectively. The average travel time for East Stroudsburg residents was a hefty 37.9 minutes, compared with the next-longest time of 28.6 minutes for Philadelphia residents and a national average of 25.8 minutes.

Numerous reasons have been cited for the increase in long-distance commuting from East Stroudsburg:

- Rising home prices in and near New York (the “drive till you qualify” rationale);
- The pull of starry night skies and other rural amenities;
- A desire for less risk after the 9/11 tragedy;
- Limited job opportunities in Monroe County.

Commutes reflect a tradeoff of one’s time for higher wages, lower housing costs, or a preferred lifestyle. East Stroudsburg’s caravan of commuters who depart before dawn and return after dusk reflect one of several extreme responses to the hard choices faced by workers in the high-cost New York metropolitan area.¹⁰ Rail service could reduce the time, improve the schedule, and alleviate the stress of East Stroudsburg’s road warriors. Indeed, for decades, long-range transportation plans for East Stroudsburg, the Lehigh Valley, and other regions have expressed great enthusiasm for transit to larger cities. However, these plans have languished, as federal law requires that they demonstrate reasonable expectations of available funding.¹¹

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The simple examples described in this article illustrate the potential for creating significantly more robust regional economies by strategically improving transit or encouraging more compact urban development. Households can benefit from greater mobility — easier access to more jobs with shorter commute times and less congestion. Firms can benefit from a larger skilled labor pool and by the boost to productivity that tends to accompany the growth of metropolitan areas.

What compact urban design can accomplish for cities can be mirrored by better rural planning practices, as well.¹² Compact development in rural areas preserves open space and retains the lifestyle that prior residents enjoyed and new residents seek. Consolidating new growth within existing rural villages and towns could reduce the number and scale of MSAs, such as Salisbury, and could increase the efficiencies (and thus lower the cost) of providing fixed-rail transit from East Stroudsburg into New York City. ■

NOTES

¹ On the basis of its 2010 population estimate, Franklin County was delineated by the OMB as the Chambersburg–Waynesboro, PA, MSA — a promotion from its prior status as a micropolitan statistical area. In turn, commuting patterns tied Franklin County to the Hagerstown, MD, MSA, and thus with the combined statistical area (CSA) designated as the Washington–Baltimore–Arlington, DC–MD–VA–WV–PA CSA.

² For a look at how baseball allegiances often mirror commuting ties, see the fascinating *New York Times* interactive graphic.

³ In its 2010 notice of new criteria for delineating metropolitan statistical areas, the OMB states that “the general concept of a metropolitan statistical area is that of an area containing a large population nucleus and adjacent communities that have a high degree of integration with that nucleus.”

⁴ Other significant “acquisitions” by large CSAs of far-flung Third District MSAs included Atlantic City, MD; Ocean City, MD; and Dover, DE, by the Philadelphia–Reading–Camden, PA–NJ–DE–MD CSA. Reading, PA, and Vineland, NJ, continued to be included. Both Atlantic City and Ocean City have been part of prior incarnations of the Philadelphia CSA. East Stroudsburg and the Allentown–Bethlehem–Easton MSAs were absorbed by the New York–Newark, NY–NJ–CT–PA CSA.

⁵ After the 2000 census, Wicomico qualified as an MSA, Sussex and Worcester qualified as micropolitan statistical areas, and Somerset was ineligible as a CBSA on its own. However, Somerset had enough residents commuting into Wicomico to be considered an outlying county of the small, largely rural MSA.

⁶ Wicomico’s population grew by over 14,000 people (17 percent) to reach a total population of 98,733 in 2010.

⁷ The Salisbury urbanized area includes an additional 239 people in neighboring Somerset County, MD.

⁸ Delmar’s motto is “The little town too big for one state.”

⁹ Long-distance commuters are defined here as those who commute 45 minutes or more one way. This metric allows historical comparisons with 1980 and 1990, when commutes were shorter. In 2013, 22.5 percent of East Stroudsburg residents commuted 60 minutes or more, compared with 8.4 percent for the nation.

¹⁰ In addition to the time spent commuting, researchers have associated long commutes with greater incidences of neck and back pain, obesity, worry, even divorce. See the articles by Anette Haas and Liv Osland, and Erika Sandow. Alois Stutzer and Bruno Frey found “a large negative effect of commuting time on people’s satisfaction with life” after compensating for offsetting benefits, such as higher wages and lower housing costs. The paradox persisted even after accounting for potential frictions, benefits to other household members, and other explanations. Whether their extreme commute reflects a voluntary choice or one imposed by life events, these commuters represent one manifestation of the victims of a culture that Philip Slater cautioned against in his 1960s book, *The Pursuit of Loneliness*.

¹¹ Passenger rail service from the Poconos to New York City and to Philadelphia operated for nearly 100 years before ending in the 1960s. The Lackawanna Railroad established eight stations in Monroe County. In 1881, five trains departed from New York City daily for the Poconos.

¹² See Randall Arendt’s *Rural by Design*.

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